

BOOK CLUB NOTES

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***A Kiss from Mr Fitzgerald*, Natasha Lester (Hachette Australia)**

SUMMARY

His hand was frozen on his jacket pocket, covering the Tiffany's box that was no doubt hidden inside. The Tiffany's box that any other girl in the world would give her right arm for. For a single moment, Evie wished she was normal. That all she wanted was to be married and have babies. Then she could say yes and Charlie would smile, rather than looking at her as if she'd stabbed him. (p. 99)

Evie Lockhart is the younger daughter of upper-middle class parents living in conservative Concord, Massachusetts in 1920s America. Their neighbours, the Whitmans, are wealthy New York bankers, and it is assumed by both families that Evie will marry their younger son and her childhood best friend, Charlie. However, Evie is not convinced that a life of tea parties and embroidery is enough for her. Nor can she turn her mind to thinking of 'Charles the man, not Charlie the boy who'd been her great friend.' (p. 5)

Happening upon a young woman, alone and secretly giving birth to an illegitimate child on the banks of a river, Evie immediately goes to her aid. The mother dies and the baby disappears to a New York orphanage, but this tragic event sets the course of Evie's future. She decides to pursue her dream to study medicine, in particular obstetrics so she can help women achieve better birthing outcomes. Studying medicine is simply not considered acceptable, or even possible, for young women of the time, and both her parents and her prospective husband, Charles, forbid the plan.

Turning her back on the expectations of her family, Evie abandons Charles and the only life she knows, and moves to New York to fight for acceptance into Columbia University's medical school. Charles's older brother, Thomas, encourages Evie's endeavours to study medicine by introducing her to a tutor, as does Mrs Whitman who initially provides her with accommodation. No longer financially supported by her father, Evie auditions for a part as a chorus girl in the infamous Ziegfeld Follies. She gets the part and steals the show, but what will it mean for her fledgling relationship with Upper East Side banker, Thomas Whitman? If only she could live a life less scandalous...

About the author

Natasha Lester worked as a marketing executive for ten years before returning to university to study creative writing. *A Kiss from Mr Fitzgerald* is Natasha's third book. Her previous novels are *What is Left Over, After* (2010, winner of the T.A.G. Hungerford Award for an unpublished manuscript) and *If I Should Lose You* (2012). She is well known as a writing teacher and mentor, and has been described by *The Age* newspaper as 'a remarkable Australian talent'. Natasha has three children and lives in Perth.

Questions for discussion

- Why does Evie have so little regard for her parents' views and the standards by which she was raised? And why is her sister Viola so different?
- Despite Evie's ambitions to become an obstetrician, her character doesn't present as a feminist. How do her motivations differ from feminists of the period?
- What does Thomas offer Evie that Charles cannot?
- Why is Evie's father so violently opposed to her ambitions? Is it simply a matter of medicine being an unacceptable vocation for women, or do you think there is more behind it?
- Charles says to Evie: 'With you beside me, everyone would know I was the successful one.' Why is Charles so competitive with his brother Thomas? And is Evie right to wonder if Charles wanted to marry her 'because he loved her, or only because he thought she was pretty and it would help him prove a point?' (p. 10)
- Why does Mrs Whitman take Evie's side and help her with the move to New York when, clearly, it is not what her son Charles wants?
- Evie tells her friend Bea that she can never marry Thomas: 'Everything I am will ruin him. I love him too much to destroy his life.' (p. 334) And yet Thomas has always pledged his support for what she was doing: 'Because I know you and respect why you're doing it. More than that, I hope you succeed.' (p. 215) So why do you think Evie treated Thomas the way she did? Why did she not give him the benefit of the doubt?

- Evie struggles first to gain entry to study medicine and then battles against discrimination by male students, tutors and medical practitioners. Do you think there are parallels with women studying medicine, or other male-dominated occupations, today?
- In an interview, Lester says of writing historical fiction that it: “shows us where we’ve come from and sheds light on the stories of the people who’ve allowed us to get where we are”. (Interview with Tess Woods, <http://www.tesswoods.com.au/bookclub/may-book-club-pick-a-kiss-from-mr-fitzgerald-natasha-lester>). Do you agree?
- What is the significance of the title of the book and references to Scott Fitzgerald’s writing throughout the text; for example, pps 3, 40, 52, 61?
- The author starts the book with a prologue. What do you think is the purpose of this?
- Evie is a likeable character, a courageous and resourceful young woman. But not all characters in the book are likeable. In comparing commercial fiction with literary fiction, Lester says ... “in literary fiction, I think you can get away with the not-always-likeable character a bit more, but you definitely can’t in commercial fiction”. (Interview with Casey Hamer, <http://bookbirdy.com/2016/03/27/meet-the-author-natasha-lester/>) Why do you think she says this?
- *A Kiss for Mr Fitzgerald* has been likened to the classic beauty of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* and Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (Tessa Woods). Discuss the similarities and differences between these works.
- If *A Kiss for Mr Fitzgerald* were made into a film, who do you think should play the lead parts?

If you liked this book, you may also like...

What is Left Over, After, Natasha Lester, Fremantle Press, 2110

If I Should Lose You, Natasha Lester, Fremantle Press, 2012

The Paris Wife, Paula McLain, Virago, 2010

Z: A Novel of Zelda Fitzgerald, Therese Anne Fowler, Hodder & Stoughton, 2013

The Last Painting of Sara De Vos, Dominic Smith, Allen & Unwin, 2016

Precious Things, Kelly Doust, HarperCollins, 2016

The ‘Dody McClelland’ series, Felicity Young, HarperCollins